THE LITTLE PRESS IN CANADA

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The activity of the Little Press is an index to the vitality of the literary underground. Most typically the instrument of the Little Magazine the Little Press takes many forms. It may be distinguished, however, from the average private press by its preoccupation with new and experimental writing, by its idealism and amateurism and by its ephemeral and capricious nature. The weakness of the typical Little Press is its compulsion to publish whatever is new and different, regardless of merit; its virtue, on the other hand, is to act as a sensitive seismograph recording subtle changes in literary sensibility. Little Press publication, for reasons both aesthetic and financial, are not aimed at the general public. Most of them serve, more or less intentionally, to strengthen that mysterious international network of readers and writers which comprises the Little Magazine world.

In Canada the first significant Little Press was established in Montreal in the early Forties by John Sutherland and his associates. As editors of First Statement magazine these young writers managed to purchase a second-hand press, taught themselves to set type and laboriously but lovingly performed all the other tasks connected with the printing and publishing of a magazine. The importance, for modern literature in Canada, of First Statement magazine and its successor Northern Review is well-known. But John Sutherland made further significant use of First Statement Press. At a time when commercial houses were decidedly reluctant to publish young Canadian Poets Sutherland established the First Statement New Writers Series. Irving Layton's first book Here and Now (1945) was No.1 of the series; succeeding titles included work by Patrick Anderson, Miriam Waddington, and Ann Wilkinson. Designed and illustrated by artist Betty Sutherland, First Statement books were more attractive than the occasional chapbooks put out by commercial

publishers and more professional in appearance than the publications of many more recent Little Presses.

One other important publication by First Statement Press was the anthology Other Canadians (1947). With its challenging introduction by Sutherland and its generous representations of Preview and First Statement poets, Other Canadians serves historically as a salutary corrective to the impression made by the first edition of AJM Smith's prestigious The Book of Canadian Poetry.

As the power of First Statement Press declined its role was taken over in the early Fifties by Contact Press. Louis Dudek, who had learned much from Sutherland and more later from his New York sojourn and his correspondence with Ezra Pound, provided the initiative and zeal for the founding of the new press. Established as a poets' cooperative, Contact was more prolific and more ambitious than First Statement. This time the poets did not set their own type; they sent their manuscripts to a job-printer. There remained, however, all the other important chores of publishing, from the selection and editing of manuscripts to the designing and distribution of the books. Contact Press began by publishing Cerberus (1952) which comprised poems and prefaces by the three poet-editors (Dudek, Layton and Souster) and continued throughtout the Fifties and Sixties to publish the work of deserving and neglected Canadians poets of their choice. Contact Press kept in close touch with the literary underground through Little Magazines such as Contact, Civ/n and Delta with which the poet-publishers were variously connected. But as the years wore on, the Press displayed less urgent commitment to new and experimental writers. By the late Fifties Contact Press had become a prestige symbol; it could afford to wait until a writer had proved himself elsewhere before offering him the advantages of the Contact imprint. In this sense, Contact has lost some of the character of the Little Press although it has given recent evidence of a continuing interest in experimental writing. The publication of New Wave Canada has redeemed the Press

somewhat in the eyes of new young writers, though this anthology may reflect simply the predilections of editor Raymond Souster. In general Contactb seems content to function as a private press serving the liberal fringe of the general poetry reading public rather than as an intimate guage and instrument of the avant-garde.

This latter function has been in some small measure served by two other publishing ventures in which Dudek is engaged. The McGill Poetry Series (which in fairness should be named the Dudek Poetry Series) has been devoted to talented students whose work came to the attention of Professor Dudek. Beginning with Leonard Cohen's Let Us Compare Mythologies (1956) the series has included such titles as Daryl Hine's The Carnal and the Crane, D.G. Jones' Frost on the Sun and Pierre Coupey's Bring Forth the Cowards. Recently Dudek has launched Delta Canada which so far has ~~four~~ five titles to its credit, including R.G. Everson's Wrestle With an Angel and Michael Gnarowski's Postscript for St. James Street. Delta's most recent publication is Pictures on the Skin, an exceptionally attractive volume of poems by Eldon Grier with full-colour reproductions of paintings by Sylvia Tait.

Other Little Presses active in the Fifties proved of varying duration and importance. Some were short-lived but made valuable contributions, such as Emblem Books, an imprint under which Joy MacPherson published her own early work and that of Daryl Hine and Alfred Purdy and others. The Fiddlehead Press under the editorship of Fred Cogswell is still extant. It has served the Maritime poets well and includes titles by Alfred Purdy and Alden Nowlan as well as the regional anthology Five New Brunswick Poets. Alphabet Press is used mainly to print Alphabet Magazine but James Reaney has plans to make of it a "regional publishing centre" for writers in Western Ontario. Reaney does his own printing. Some insight into the motivation of the Little Presses as well as a sense of Reaney's fascination with the visual form of letters can be gained from his remarks about his press: "I learnt typesetting, acquired type and got a press because it was the only way to get out a little mag that looked right and didn't cost the moon. Paul Arthur's Here and Now is the force behind the idea of it looking right. John Sutherland gave me the notion that you could do it this way...All sorts of (experiments) are possible because you have this trusty giant with the old squeeze power...you can initiate things that no commercial

publisher would dare to think of...There is something utterly glamorous about type and a press...I've learnt the feel of books since I started doing all this. Actually it all goes back to a rubber printing set I was given (or earned at 5¢ a week) as a kid in return for watching our flock of geese-that it didn't get into the wheat. By that print set I was hooked!" Reaney's publishing ventures, apart from Alphabet magazine include his own Dance of Death and Colleen Thibideau"s Lozenges (Poems in the shapes of things.) Among other Little Presses in the early sixties John Robert Colombo's Hawkshead was particularly active, publishing a half-dozen titles by Colombo himself as well as the work of Joy MacPherson, Mike Strong, Milton Acorn, Phyllis Gotlieb and others.

In the mid-sixties several new Little Presses have been established. Nelson Ball, who edits the magazine Weed, also supervises the Weed/Flower Press which publishes both American and Canadian poets. The Quarry Press, which publishes Quarry Magazine, has also issued the Beast with Three Backs (poems by Tom Eadie, Tom Marshall and Colin Norman). Prism/International has announced plans to publish a series of foreign-language poets.

The role of the strictly avant-garde press, however, has clearly been taken over by three new Little Presses. Bill Bissett (Vancouver wizard of typography and graphics) is the editor of Blew Ointment Magazine. He has now established a press called Very Stone House. The first title of the press is Fires in the Temple "done" (for written is hardly the word) by Bissett himself. New photo off-set techniques permit great freedom in reproduction and allow, in this case, for the wildest distribution of type on a page. But this is the least of Bissett's innovations: the production has to be seen to be believed. Other titles issued by Very Stone House are by Pat Lane, James Reid, Seymour Mayne and Milton Acorn.

Ganglia Press in Toronto is another source of audacious experiment. Currently it is offering the Singing Hand Series which includes a pamphlet called ~~ASPS~~ Asps and Other Wourneys by David Aylward. It has also published the Universal Pome (described as a small poem-sculpture in cellophane and cardboard) by bp nichol and is planning

"a postcard series of concrete poems." Recently Ganglia published a selection of Bissett's work called We Sleep Inside Each Other All. Appended to this is a helpful note on "The typogeography of Bill Bissett" by bp nichol.

The most ambitious of the new avant-garde presses is run by Victor Coleman. In addition to the magazines Island and Is (pronounced "Eyes") Island Press has published books by Fred Wah, Stephen Rodefer and Coleman himself. Its most recent title is an experimental work by Gerry Gilbert called Phone Book. Coleman has also undertaken to reproduce, in their original mimeograph form, the important defunct Little Magazines Combustion, Contact and Measure.

Island Press has recently joined forces with Stan Bevington's Coach House Press. Bevington has his printing shop literally in an old coach house on Bathurst Street in Toronto. He has previously published, among other titles, the LSD Leacock by Joe Rosemblatt and New Wings for Icarus By Henry Beissel. All Coach House books so far have been marked by their colourful design and attractive typography. Coach House is now printing Is magazine in a much improved format. Bevington and Coleman have also launched a brand new venture in bookselling. Catalogue No. 1 of their Modern First Editions is earmarked Canadiana and lists about forty items of out-of-print modern poetry and rare numbers of Little Magazines.

Coach House plans to publish this fall a "book" by bp nichol called Journeying and Returns. The advance notice calls it "more than a book...this three part package dissolves arbitrary boundaries between mediums to present the totality of one man's existence. The first part... is a forty-eight page long poem sequence...the second part is a recording of two long sound poems..the third part is a selection of 15 visual concrete poems and objects..."

Obviously the work of new avant-garde Little Press is only partially literary. With them we enter a McLuhan-type universe which exploits several media simultaneously and engages the audience in a kinetic communion. One does not "read" artists like

Bissett and Nichol-one "connects" in an audio-visual-tactile mode of response. Traditional literary criteria are no longer adequate to describe or measure this new form of multi-dimensional communication.

Readers for whom modern poetry is still primarily a literary experience are well-served by several private presses notable for the artistic excellence of their publications. Private Presses often exhibit qualities conspicuously lacking in the average Little Press. They are marked by a concern for the book as a physical object of artisitic potential, by their professional competence in design, typography, and printing, and by their relative stability and business sense. When these qualities are combined with an interest in good modern writing, the result is likely to be a fine book whose appearance and contents form an artistic whole. Such a press is Klanak of Vancouver. 'Klanak' is a Salish Indian work meaning "a gathering of the tribes for serious discussion". It suggests the way publisher William McConnell thinks about books. He brings together the talents of writers and the professional craft of designers and printers to produce such attractive volumes as Marya Fiamengo's The Quality of Halves, F.R. Scott's Signature, Ralph Gustafson's Rocky Mountain Poems and Klanak Islands, an anthology of short stories. Klanak books are so successful artistically that they have won prizes at Book Fairs and Typography Shows here and abroad.

The concern for the physical appearance of a book also distinguishes the productions of Periwinkle Press, another Vancouver venture. Publisher Takao Tanake, primarily a painter, does his own printing, illustration and design. He publishes only the poetry that that interests him and only when he can take time off from his painting. Titles bearing the Periwinkle imprint are Roy Kiyooka's Kyoto Airs, Gerry Gilbert's White Lunch, Phyllis Webb's Naked Poems and John Newlove's Elephants Mothers and Others.

Another more ambitious private press which combines the talents of artists is the Heinrich Heine in Toronto which last year advertised an unusual portfolio called

Miraculous Montages featuring the poems of John Robert Colombo, drawings by Don Jean-louis and typographic design by Peter Dorn, "each page will be printed by hand," runs the advertisement - "the numberous drawings will be reproduced in a unique way- by blind embossing...The entire portfolio will be housed in an unusual case." Publisher Peter Dorn has already won awards for his editions of the Selected Poems of Heinrich Heine and of Voyage of the Mood by Joseph Rosenblatt. Still an other press founded by a desinger-typographer (William Reuter) specializes in the artistic union of text and format. Reuter's Aliquondo Press has published four titles, the latest being Barry McKinnon's The Golden Daybreak Hair.

At the other end of the scale from such elaborate production is the work of Upbank Press in Morin Heights, P.Q. Upbank is not primarily literary but it deserves to be known for its unique devotion to humour. Cartoonist Peter Whalley has for several yyears issued a series called Hyperbole under the imprint of Upbank. In various formats, the numbers of Hyperbole have graphically satirized Canadian public figures and institutions. Notable are the "Diefenbaker Record Album," "Some New Canadian Stamps" (gummed and perforated) "A Dominion Day Salute" with its startling fold-in (like Mad Magazine) version of the famous fathers of confederation portrait, and a riotous satire of the craze for Eskimo Art. Of more literary interest is the hilarious parody of Layton and Town's Love Where the Nights are Long. Hyperbole's version is Lust Where the Summer's Short by "Ivy Persis Peyton" and "Henrietta Nowt." It deserves to be much better known than it is.

As active as Little Presses and Private Presses are in Canada, however, they still do not account for all the interesting work published by experimental modern writers. Frequently modern Canadians are published by Little Presses in other countries. Creeley's Divers Press and Jonathan Williams Jargon Press have both published Irving Layton. George Bowering's The Man in Yellow Boots was brought out by El Corno Emplumado, Mexico. Ron Everson's Incident on Cote Des Neiges bears the imprint of the Green Knight Press, Amherst, Mass.

Furthermore, a poet often brings out his early books by the simple device of hiring a job-printer and taking care, himself, of the remaining chores of publishing, in which case he sometimes invents a "press" for the occasion. Thus Two Longer Poems by Howith and Hawkins was published by "Patrician Press" and an early book of Layton's by "Laokoon Press." Scores of poetry titles in recent years have appeared under similar "ghost" imprints. Many of these are so ephemeral and so poorly produced that they serve little purpose beyond announcing a poet's presence and gaining (hopefully) the attention of a reviewer. Others prove of lasting interest because of their design as well as their poetic content, as in the case of John Newlove's Grave Sirs produced by "The Private Press of Robert Reid and Takao Tanabe." Such titles are soon out of print and extant copies eventually become the pride of jealous collectors.

Most of the books privately printed or published by the Little or private press are not reviewed in newspapers and magazines. This is due partly to failures in distribution and partly to the indifference of book page editors who have in mind, naturally, the general reading public. Frequently, too, the writers themselves are content with a small group of readers with avant-garde tastes.

For the general reader who may be interested in the activities of the Little Press one way to gain information is to subscribe to one or more Little Magazines. Even the most ephemeral Canadian Little Mag is likely to contain advertisements and notices, and sometimes reviews, of recently published experimental work. A more systematic approach may be made through Trace, a quarterly which specializes in "an evolving directory" of Little Magazines; or The Small Press Review, a new quarterly by Dust Books (California) which also promises international coverage.

The reader who follows such clues will find that he has embarked on a stimulating adventure: he will be threading his way through the mysterious and fascinating labyrinths of the literary underground.